

Fact Sheet: Disability Program

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC)'s Disability Program seeks to improve the lives and protect the rights of women, children, and youth with disabilities who are displaced by crisis and conflict. We research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for changes to policies and programs that strengthen their resilience and drive positive change in humanitarian practice.

Background:

The global population of people who have been forcibly displaced reached a record [66 million](#) in 2016. Among them, as many as [13.2 million](#) people displaced have disabilities. Within this context, women, children, and youth with disabilities are often excluded from programs and activities that would protect them and help them develop their skills, including services addressing gender-based violence, programs for adolescents and youth, and information and education about sexual and reproductive health and services. These are the types of services and assistance that would build their skills and capacities and make them more resilient to [protection risks such as violence, abuse, and exploitation](#).

Additionally, while many countries affected by crisis or conflict have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, displaced persons rarely have contact with local organizations representing persons with disabilities (DPOs) that could [advocate for their access](#) to services and programs and highlight their needs to human rights reports.

How does the Disability Program seek to address these challenges?

WRC regularly consults with a wide range of stakeholders — including refugees and displaced persons with disabilities and their caregivers, key stakeholders like local organizations of women with disabilities, UN agencies and operational humanitarian organizations — in order to build the case for disability inclusion in humanitarian action. WRC's disability program has developed four main workstreams to address these challenges:

1. *Identifying what works for displaced women, children, and youth with disabilities*

WRC works to gather evidence on effective strategies for inclusion of women, children and youth displaced by crisis and conflict. We achieve this by conducting participatory research projects with affected communities; providing technical support to operational partners; and piloting and evaluating strategies for disability inclusion in gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response, women's protection and empowerment, adolescent girls programming, and youth-engagement activities.

The disability program works to ensure the voices of refugees and displaced persons with disabilities are at the center of our work. We consult directly with women, children, and youth with disabilities, using creative and engaging communication methods, and facilitate workshops that bring refugees, humanitarian actors, and organizations of persons with disabilities.

Since WRC's early disability work assisting UNHCR roll out its [Global Guidance on Working with Persons with Disabilities in Forced Displacement](#), WRC has continued to document findings and effective strategies for inclusion and develop tools for humanitarian actors. For example, WRC partnered with the International Rescue Committee to develop a [Toolkit for GBV practitioners on Disability Inclusion](#), which is now a [foundational resource](#) for humanitarian actors working in GBV prevention and response. We have recently expanded our operational partnerships to provide technical support on disability inclusion in GBV and adolescent girls programming in Lebanon; support youth programming in Iraq; strengthen protective peer networks for refugees with intellectual disabilities in urban areas; and develop and pilot a participatory resource entitled [Gender-based Violence Against Children and Youth with Disabilities: A Toolkit for Child Protection Actors](#).

Furthermore, WRC continues to gather evidence by documenting "[Stories of Change](#)" by displaced women, children, and youth with disabilities to understand, in their own words, what changes are important for them in their lives and use this information to carry out further advocacy to the wider humanitarian community.



"My sister and I came up with our own story that we would like to present together. We drew a girl in a wheelchair, and the best thing is that she is surrounded by other girls. A handicapped person doesn't have a lot of rights, but we learned in the project that being handicapped is not to be physically handicapped but it's about the mentality, and us being in the program proved that we can participate."

- Sisters participating in an adolescent girls' program in North Lebanon

2. Strengthening the leadership of organizations of women with disabilities in humanitarian action

Organizations of women with disabilities play a critical role in promoting the rights of women and girls affected by conflict or crisis, including those with disabilities. From the onset of an emergency through to recovery and development, the expertise of organizations of women with disabilities remains largely untapped. They face a vicious cycle of lack of funding and inadequate organizational capacity. Their exclusion from both the disability and the women's rights movements further hinders their capacity development and leadership opportunities in the humanitarian sector.

Toward this effort, WRC has provided ongoing mentoring and technical support to organizations of women with disabilities to play a greater role in humanitarian action at national and international levels. This has involved:

- Conducting regional workshops with women with disabilities, providing training on humanitarian issues, planning actions at national levels, and developing joint messages for global advocacy opportunities;
- Supporting the participation of women with disabilities at global events — such as the World Humanitarian Summit, the Commission on the Status of Women, and the Conference of State Parties — and sharing their advocacy messages;

- Developing and piloting a [Facilitator's Guide on Strengthening the Role of Women with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action](#) together with women's DPO partners.

Organizations like the [National Union of Women with Disabilities in Uganda \(NUWODU\)](#) are now successfully engaged in advocating for and representing the rights of displaced women and girls with disabilities in human rights monitoring mechanisms, such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) national implementation and review process, as well as in the development of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework in Uganda, led by UNHCR.

3. [Informing and influencing resilience-based approaches in humanitarian settings](#)

Humanitarian response rarely identifies and leverages the coping strategies and capacities of women, children, and youth, and certainly falls short of engaging individuals within these groups to achieve resilience. As such, populations affected by crisis are viewed as recipients and beneficiaries of aid, rather than as partners with values and skills to contribute to their recovery and resolution to crisis. However, new programming models are emerging that focus on a resilience-based approach—emphasizing skills, capacities, strengths, and capital. WRC informs and influences the development and implementation of resilience-based approaches in humanitarian settings to improve outcomes for displaced women, children, and youth. We do this by (i) promoting the inclusion of women, children, and youth in programming models that emphasize their resilience, and (ii) advocating for humanitarian response that strengthens the capacities of women, children, and youth, in all their diversity.

Toward these objectives, WRC explored how programs responding to the Syrian crisis (which focused on vulnerability or resilience) are supporting the protection and empowerment of Syrian refugee women, children, and youth with disabilities. We conducted an extensive literature review and examined the results of pilot projects with adolescents and youth in Iraq and Lebanon. Based on this initial work, WRC identified [a set of actions](#) that must be taken to ensure that the resilience of refugees with disabilities is recognized and fostered in programming. These findings and recommendations have relevance across other humanitarian settings and can inform broader discussions on how to build more effective responses that address vulnerability, support resilience, and are fully inclusive.

4. [Improving accountability for the inclusion of women, children, and youth with disabilities](#)

While global, national, and organizational policies and commitments to protect and empower affected populations apply to persons with disabilities, they often lack specific reference to women and girls with disabilities. There is also no globally-endorsed operational guidance in existence to support humanitarian actors in implementing policies and commitments to disability inclusion in a systematic way; no such guidance ensures appropriate human and financial resourcing; strengthens staff knowledge, attitudes, and practices; and monitors access and inclusion of women and girls with disabilities. WRC advocates for global policies and guidelines that strengthen accountability for the inclusion of women, children, and youth with disabilities across the humanitarian sector. For example, WRC participated in the drafting of the [Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action](#), ensuring specific commitments to the protection and empowerment of women and girls with disabilities. WRC is also an active member of the [IASC Task Team on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities](#)



[in Humanitarian Action](#), which is currently working to develop globally endorsed guidelines for the humanitarian sector, and supports our partners — organizations of women with disabilities from conflict-affected countries — to share their priorities in global humanitarian, development, and human rights forums.

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