Harnessing technology to increase access to sexual and reproductive health information and services for adolescent girls in Lebanon and Iraq

Background

Often excluded, marginalized, and at risk of gender-based violence (GBV) and negative health outcomes, adolescent girls are disproportionately affected by humanitarian crises, protracted displacement, and the aftermath of such emergencies.[1] In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the assets and vulnerabilities of adolescent girls in emergency settings, resulting in the development of more tools and programs to engage this vulnerable population. Targeted interventions to respond to the needs expressed by adolescent girls - specifically related to their sexual and reproductive health (SRH) - is an emerging area of research and programming in humanitarian contexts globally.

In Lebanon and Iraq, safe spaces for women and girls have been established as a key approach of reaching adolescent girls and providing them with access to SRH information, links to services, skill-building, peer connection, and support. Yet access to physical safe spaces is often limited for adolescent girls because of security concerns, gender norms, and domestic responsibilities. Girls who do attend programming in these spaces may feel shy to discuss sensitive topics regarding their SRH.

Expanding access to information and communications technologies (ICT) provides opportunities for learning and education, especially in remote regions and during humanitarian crises. Increasing access to ICT has the potential to reach the most marginalized adolescent girls with information and services that would otherwise be unavailable, including education, legal, and health services.

Our work

The Women's Refugee Commission, in partnership with UNICEF, is implementing a two-year project developing innovative tools and approaches to better reach adolescent girls in Lebanon and Iraq with SRH information and services. To understand how adolescent girls use technology to access information and services, field assessments were carried out in Lebanon and Iraq in July 2018. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Focus group and key informant interview participants			
	Lebanon	Iraq	Total
Total number of adolescent girl focus group discussions (FGDs) (and participants)	11 (n=124)	10 (n=119)	21 (n=243)
Attending programming in safe spaces	9 (n=90)	10 (n=119)	10 (n=209)
Not attending any programming in safe spaces	2 (n=34)	0	2 (n=34)
Aged 10-14 years	4 (n=43)	1 (n=14)	5 (n=57)
Aged 15-19 years	7 (n=81)	9 (n=105)	16 (n=186)
Total number of parent/caregiver FGDs	4 (n=54)	4 (n=39)	8 (n=93)
Total number of key informant interviews (KIIs)	9	9	18

This brief provides information on the findings from the field assessments and proposed ways forward for the creation of a virtual safe space platform to be piloted in UNICEF-supported safe spaces for women and girls in Lebanon and Iraq. The findings presented in this brief are applicable beyond the scope of this project for other humanitarian actors and practitioners implementing programs or providing services for adolescent girls.

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1 UNFPA and Save the Children, *Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Toolkit for Humanitarian Settings,* 2009, https://www.unfpa.org/publications/adolescent-sexual-and-reproductive-health-toolkit-humanitarian-settings

Findings

Access to mobile phones and the internet is widespread, but sometimes restricted, especially for certain groups

For adolescent girls in both Lebanon and Iraq, access to mobile phones and the internet is widespread. Ownership of mobile phones was mixed, with some girls, especially older adolescents, reporting that they have their own mobile phones, while others shared a phone with family members. In both cases, mobile phones usually had 3G internet connectivity. Adolescent girls in both Lebanon and Iraq said that they most commonly used their phones to chat with friends and share photos using Facebook and WhatsApp, watch videos on YouTube, play games, and listen to music.

Adolescent girls participated in a body mapping exercise to show the physical, emotional and societal changes that occur when transitioning from childhood to adulthood.

Certain groups of girls were less likely to have access to mobile phones and the internet. In Lebanon, married adolescent girls reported more restrictions on their use of technology, with very few owning their own mobile phones, and many requiring permission from their husband to use his phone. In Iraq, internally displaced Iraqi adolescent girls were less likely than Syrian refugee adolescent girls to have access to a mobile phone or the internet. Younger adolescent girls in both Lebanon and Iraq either had more restrictions or were less interested in using the internet than older adolescent girls.

Both adolescent girls and their parents and caregivers reported that monitoring girls' use of mobile phones was common. Some parents and caregivers reported doing so every time their daughter used the phone, or restricting her use of phones altogether, while others would periodically checking what pages she had visited.

> "I monitor them. If my daughter is using YouTube on the phone, I'll ask her to give it to me so that I can see what she's looking at. But so far, I haven't seen her watching anything bad." —Mother/female caregiver, Lebanon

> "Yes, [my children] could use [a mobile phone] in front of me, and I would monitor them the whole time. But I wouldn't let them have their own phones. Especially if there is internet within the home. They'll be on it all the time. When you go to sleep, they might open some pages." —Mother/female caregiver, Lebanon

Some parents and caregivers explained that monitoring use of the internet on a mobile phone was very difficult, since girls know how to delete what they have searched on the internet, yet parents and caregivers still allowed their daughters to use it. Others acknowledged that adolescent girls, especially when they are older, should be given some privacy, and parents and caregivers should work on building trust with their daughters so that their daughters feel comfortable informing them if they come across inappropriate content or have negative interactions on the internet.

> "There might be a friend who is a bad influence. It is impossible to monitor. Especially with the internet. There is 'delete.' You can visit anything." —Father/male caregiver, Lebanon

Technology can be harnessed for educational purposes

Girls were enthusiastic when they described using mobile phones and the internet and expressed an interest in continuing to develop their ICT skills. Girls mentioned how the internet could be used for educational purposes.

> "[The internet can be used] to understand something you don't know about. Something you couldn't have known otherwise. Now we are discussing these topics [puberty and SRH] here, but maybe people outside here are concerned with these topics too." -Adolescent girl, Lebanon

> "Physical changes start in the girl's body when she becomes 13 or 14 and keeps changing until 19. She may have psychological changes. Also her hormones start to change."
>> Facilitator: "Where did you get this valuable information from?"
> "From school and the internet. The internet is very useful to get such information." -Adolescent girl, Iraq

Using technology comes with risks for adolescent girls

While girls and their parents or caregivers generally agreed that it was acceptable to use mobile phones and the internet, many also warned of the dangers of doing so. Girls relayed stories of other girls their age who had been deceived via the internet; some stories involved boys who convinced girls to send inappropriate photos, others mentioned ways in which people could remotely extract information from a girl's phone. Parents and caregivers were often worried about adolescent girls interacting with boys when using their mobile phones.

> "[A girl] can be exploited through her phone. When a guy asks her to send her picture, she will send it without thinking." -Adolescent girl, Iraq

> "You might have pictures on your phone. The other day we heard that sometimes you get phone calls that cut right after you answer and they withdraw all the pictures from your phone. You might be a veiled woman but have photos of yourself, and maybe your friends, without the veil." –Adolescent girl, Lebanon

Recognizing the potential to use mobile phones and the internet to access SRH information

When asked if mobile phones would be a good way to access SRH-related information, girls were at first hesitant, as they did not know a reliable source on the internet to do so. Some explained that the internet would be an acceptable way for a girl to get information if she did not have other options.

> "We may feel shy to tell our mother, so sometimes we ask our sisters about such things to know how to deal with [changes in our bodies]. ... Some girls don't have sisters or moms, so they search it on the internet." –Adolescent girl, Iraq

Both girls and their parents and caregivers were fearful that if girls searched for sensitive topics on the internet, they would get incorrect information or see inappropriate images.

> "If they want to learn about their bodies [and] enter a search into YouTube that relates to physical health, other images will come up, the topic is expanded on. ... They might end up looking at pornographic images or videos." –Mother/female caregiver, Lebanon

> "My niece who is 14 years old used YouTube to learn about how a woman gives birth. She was using the phone for games, but then looked it up."
>> Facilitator: "Do you think that is an acceptable way to learn about such things?"
> [Participants unanimously]: "No!" –Mothers/female caregivers, Lebanon

Girls were also concerned that someone would be able to see what they had been searching if they were to look up sensitive information on a mobile phone. Some mentioned that girls should be able to look up SRH-related information on the internet if they did so with their mothers.

Key informant interviews revealed that there was no adolescent-friendly website in Arabic that could provide scientific or accurate SRH information. Staff and facilitators in safe spaces for women and girls reported that girls often ask about things they read about on the internet. They expressed a need for a more reliable source of scientific information to which they could direct girls when questions come up, or when girls share inaccurate information that they have got from the internet.

Trusting in Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS) to provide SRH information

There was an overwhelming preference among girls and parents and caregivers for accessing information on mobile phones if the source was provided by the WGSS, along with guidance from facilitators on how to use the website or application.

"In such a place [a safe space] there would be a guide … [it's better] because there are teachers who watch over us. And it feels like a safe space and nobody can approach us." —Adolescent girl, Lebanon

Parents and caregivers also trusted the safe spaces to provide correct and useful SRH information to adolescent girls. Nearly all said they would be comfortable if their daughter were to access such information with supervision from a safe space staff member.

Recommendations and next steps

Consultations with adolescent girls, their parents and caregivers, and other key stakeholders reveal a potential for harnessing technology to expand access to SRH information and services for adolescent girls in Lebanon and Iraq. Their insights provide us with guiding parameters of developing a virtual safe space that responds to adolescent girls' needs and priorities while keeping in mind potential barriers and risks of using technology to access sensitive information.

Based on these findings, WRC will develop a virtual safe space platform that will be:

- *Factual and scientific*. The platform will provide technical information that is included in existing SRH modules being used in UNICEF-supported safe spaces for women and girls. This content has been created taking into consideration the needs and priorities of adolescent girls, as well as the cultural context.

- *Introduced to girls and their mothers and female caregivers at the safe space for women and girls.* The piloting of the platform will be led by safe space staff who already have established trust with adolescent girls and their parents and caregivers. Girls and their mothers/female caregivers will be introduced to the virtual safe space platform and can opt in or out of participating in the piloting.

- *First used in the safe space for women and girls with oversight and supervision of safe space staff.* In the piloting phase, the platform will only be available with an access code provided at the safe space. This will allow girls to familiarize themselves with the virtual safe space with standby support, and parents and caregivers can feel comfortable that a trusted staff member is monitoring the girls' use of the platform.

- *Private and confidential.* The virtual safe space will never store personal data or a browsing history. The platform's name and appearance will be discreet.

- *Adaptable and buildable.* The platform will be designed so that it may be adapted to other settings, and with the ability to have additional features added as the piloting progresses. Moreover, there will be built-in mechanisms for adolescent girls to provide feedback throughout the piloting phase, and the platform will be updated according to their needs and preferences.

The virtual safe space platform will be designed in the first half of 2019 and piloted in several UNICEF-supported safe spaces for women and girls in Lebanon and Iraq later in the year. Based on the piloting and feedback from adolescent girls, their parents and caregivers, and WGSS staff, the application will be updated and rolled out in all UNICEF-supported WGSS in the last quarter of 2019. In tandem, safe spaces will be piloting a monitoring and evaluation toolkit to better document adolescent SRH programming, measure outcomes, and promote adolescent girls' active participation in program design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

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