



Title: Sustainability Strategies for Women and Girls Safe Space

Author: Katie Robinette

Overview

A sustainability strategy for Women and Girls Safe Space (WGSS) programming is a strategy that details how international humanitarian organizations plan to withdraw their program resources and ‘exit’ from a community while ensuring sustainability of service delivery and/or benefits of WGSS programming, in order to avoid jeopardizing intended program outcomes or placing women and girls at risk.

When designing a sustainability strategy, it is important to recognize that ‘sustainability’ may have different meanings in different settings. For example, in camp contexts, which are intended to be temporary, the WGSS service itself will not be sustained when the camp shuts down. As such, issues of sustainability will be more focused on developing the skills, knowledge and leadership abilities of women and girls who access the WGSS, so that when they go back to their home areas, they can continue to apply the skills gained. In other settings, sustainability may focus on continued provision of select services through other service delivery points, rather than within the WGSS. And in still other cases, sustainability will focus on ensuring that the WGSS continues, through on-going local management and with sustained funding support. In these instances, a sustainability strategy will focus on the knowledge, skills and tangible assets that must be transferred to local oversight within a fixed time.

One key to success in sustainability is ensuring that the sustainability strategy is informed by priorities identified by women and girls who are accessing the service. Another—particularly in the case where the WGSS will continue to function—is to allow sufficient time to identify and work with a local women’s network or organization to enable them to assume responsibility for the service once the international organization withdraws. Strategy development is a collaborative effort that outlines the key steps and conditions required by all involved to move from where the program currently stands, towards a realistic and locally informed vision for what it will be after the international organization exits. This note outlines best practices on sustainability drawn from several existing resources. Additional tools are also included at the end of the note.

Best Practices in Supporting Sustainability of WGSS

Ensure that discussions of sustainability are led by and engage women and girls in the community who access the services.

The withdrawal of WGSS services will directly affect women's and girls' lives. Failing to engage local women and girls in discussions about sustainability of services not only goes against WGSS goals and principles of supporting empowerment and leadership of women and girls who access the WGSS services, it can also jeopardize their safety. When preparing a sustainability strategy, international actors must consult with women, girls and community members on how they would like to transition the work of the WGSS. The overall question to answer when planning a sustainability strategy is: *Which program services, or outcomes, do women and girls want to sustain after the program has ended?*¹

Recognizing that no humanitarian organization will be able to sustain a WGSS indefinitely, discussions around sustainability of outcomes and/or transitioning the WGSS to local oversight should begin relatively soon after the start of activities and be on-going throughout program implementation. The emerging strategy should be reviewed regularly and updated as needed based on progress toward women's and girls' prioritized objectives and goals. If women and girls advocate for maintaining the WGSS on a more permanent basis, then consultations need to move to a discussion of how that will be done, and may involve the wider community (HealthNetTPO & UNICEF, 2016).

Ensure that strategies for sustainability of WGSS are context-specific.

International and local actors should be prepared to be flexible and adapt sustainability plans according to the changing context. In some settings of relative instability, it may be helpful for sustainability strategies to include contingency plans related to unexpected phase-out of programming, such as loss of humanitarian access, or sudden movement of the population. For example, guidance from the GBV Sub-Cluster Whole of Syria (2018) divides planning into three exit phases: preparedness phase, transitional phase and operational closure phase, with suggested actions points for planned as well as for emergency closure during each phase.

In the case of WGSS in temporary camp settings, consultations will involve discussing with women and girls what information and skills will be most useful to them when they return to their home settings and how the WGSS can support sustained *value and impact* of services for women and girls. In the non-camp context, and particularly where women and girls will be remaining in the community long-term, sustainability discussion may focus more on how the WGSS can continue its services (HealthNetTPO & UNICEF, 2016).

¹See Activity 1: Planning Matrix - WGSS Exit Strategy Tool, part of Tool 37: Exit Strategy Tools (IRC & IMC, 2019: 509).

Ensure strategies for sustainability of WGSS are community-informed.

Although WGSS are meant for and run by women and girls in the community, husbands, parents, community leaders and other service providers or humanitarian agencies have a lot of influence over the ability of women and girls to attend WGSS and participate in its activities. Dissemination of information about the WGSS intervention during the assessment and implementation phases is essential for community buy-in. This practice should also apply to consultations related to sustainability of the WGSS.

In instances where women and girls wish for the space to remain functioning in the long-term, it is useful for WGSS staff to seek input and support from other stakeholders beyond the women and girls who use the services. Even if the WGSS will phase out rather than continue, it is important to establish a dialogue with community members about the plans and future of the WGSS. This approach can help to ensure that the WGSS is an accepted and integrated element of community life (UNFPA, 2015; HealthNetTPO & UNICEF, 2016). It can also ensure that the community accepts and understands the consequences of closure or transition of a WGSS.

Ensure that strategies for sustainability focus on partnerships and capacity building.

Strategic partnerships between international actors and local organizations can bring local knowledge and experience together with humanitarian expertise in a working relationship that is collaborative, risk sharing and inclusive. Genuine commitment to cooperation and shared responsibility can be established early on through the exit strategy by phasing over the WGSS program to a local partner, benefitting overall quality and sustainability both immediately and over time. To foster this sort of partnership, both partners should be involved in defining the terms and priorities of the partnership, capacity-strengthening should be a process of mutual learning; and the strategy and implementation should be developed with sufficient time and thought.²

If a decision is made to transition the WGSS to local oversight, sustainability strategies must consider *in great detail* how best to strengthen the capacity of the local women's network or organization, by setting up mechanisms to empower the network or organization to assume oversight. Depending on existing capacities and needs, this may include providing opportunities for them to proactively inform and manage programming through a shadowing model; enhancing their organizational development so that they have the infrastructure to assume oversight at the designated time; ensuring they can absorb donor funds and comply with donor reporting demands; helping them to understand and operate in bureaucratic humanitarian systems; etc. Organizational development support is often an essential component of an international actor's sustainable exit strategy and promotes greater representation of local women's organizations within humanitarian implementation and decision-making circles (IRC & IMC, 2019; UNFPA & IRC, 2017).

² If the International GBV actor does phase over the ownership of the WGSS program to a local women's organization, Tool 38: WGSS Partnership Project Closure Meeting Guidance Note can help with the closure process (IRC & IMC, 2019: 517).

A sustainability strategy that transitions to local oversight may include the following considerations:

- Advocate for long-term needs of women and girls to equally access skills development and opportunities to practice skills.
- Build on existing capacity whenever possible, prioritizing partners with aligned vision and approaches over organizational capacity only.
- Model appropriate organizational and individual behaviors which are gender-equitable based on using “power with” rather than “power over” approaches.
- Create environments that support partnerships based on equality, complementarity, transparency, responsibility, and results-oriented action.
- Continue to progress toward sustainability, e.g. where communal income-generation opportunities are offered in the WGSS, encourage women to reinvest in purchasing materials for continued benefit of other women and girls.
- Generate or procure resources locally through other community-based organizations.
- Increasingly bring external resources under local control.

Key Issues to Address in WGSS Sustainability Strategies³

- ✓ **The plan must be clear on what will happen to the women and girls attending the center once the international agency withdraws support.** Assess the support needs of women and girls and capacity of long-term stakeholders to continue to meet these needs, especially particularly vulnerable women and girls (such as those who are disabled, of certain ethnic minorities, very young or old, etc.).
- ✓ **Staff and volunteers running the WGSS must be made aware of next steps and opportunities.** They must have early warning and consultation in the process.
- ✓ **The future management structure must be laid out and agreed by all relevant parties.** WGSS may be managed by an informal women’s network, a women’s community-based organization, local non-governmental organization, national organization, government, community volunteers, etc. Emphasis should be on empowerment and an active role for women and girls, along with communities, in key decision-making about the transition of the WGSS and implementation of the strategy.
- ✓ **The sustainability strategy should include an inventory of assets, and a plan for compliance with donor and agency procedures and policies on asset transfer.** In some instances, particularly if the WGSS activities are shifting to local oversight, it can be counterproductive if women and girls are dependent on the international community for materials in order for their activities to continue. In these cases, the strategy should address ensuring

³ Adapted from HealthNetTPO & UNICEF (2016) and UNFPA (2015).

maintenance of materials and transparency when handing over materials to local ownership.

- ✓ **Identify whether or not the current space will continue to exist.** Develop plans for conducting future activities in another location if needed. This may mean transitioning the WGSS activities into other community spaces, such as community centers, churches or schools.
- ✓ **Be clear about what monitoring system will be used after the phase-out, and who will be undertaking monitoring.** If funding is transitioning to a local women's network or organization, donors may wish to continue monitoring visits after phase-out to observe progress and challenges of maintaining the WGSS. Even if there is no international funding, it may be useful for the international partner to continue monitoring visits for a specific period of time in order to support the transition.
- ✓ **A financial plan and budget must be clearly laid out.** Women, girls, communities, partners or government agencies taking on the on-going management of activities need to be clear on budget requirements and have plans on how they will raise the necessary funding.
- ✓ **There should be a timeline, but one that allows flexibility.** Ideally, the process of developing a sustainability strategy should be initiated relatively quickly after the start of a WGSS: within six to nine weeks of the program start for a one-year project, and within 6 months to a year of a five-year project. This allows women and girls to more meaningfully engage and influence the sustainability strategy. As noted previously, strategies should plan enough time for the handover between international and national partners; providing opportunities for capacity development of the staff of the safe space and/ or local organization (both institutional and technical training).⁴
- ✓ **Outline a plan for coordination.** The timeline for phase out must be coordinated with other WGSS implementing partner agencies—for example those who come to the WGSS to provide specific services, or those to whom the WGSS may refer women and girls for additional care and support. Discussions should be held with these implementers on the type of support they can give after the phase-out of the lead international agency in order to determine what activities will maintain and what kind of support they might need over the long term.

⁴See Activity 3: Developing and Implementing a Flexible Timeline, part of Tool 37: Exit Strategy Tools (IRC & IMC, 2019: 515)

Key Tools for Developing a WGSS Sustainability Strategy

The tools below provide concrete steps to help programs define the objectives of their sustainability strategy, organize activities by project phase, gather needed information to inform the strategy, brainstorm solutions for sustainability, and develop a comprehensive strategy and timeline.

Women and Girls Safe Spaces: A Toolkit for Advancing Women's and Girls' Empowerment in Humanitarian Settings (IRC & IMC, 2019) contains a chapter on Empowering Exits, including the following tools:

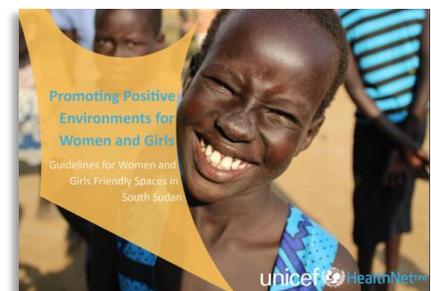
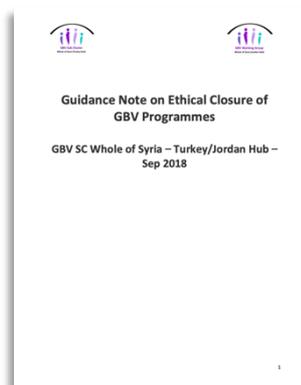
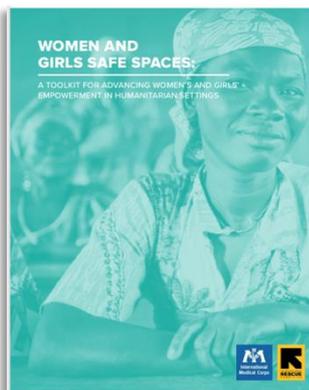
Tool 37: Exit Strategy Tools

- **Activity 1: Planning Matrix – WGSS Exit Strategy Tool**
Detailed guidance on mapping out the components of a successful sustainability strategy: developing partnerships and local linkages, building local organizational and human capacity, mobilizing local and external resources, evolving roles and relationships over the exit process, and staggering phases of activities. The tool highlights common challenges and recommendations for addressing them.
- **Activity 2: Defining the Exit Strategy and Planning the Exit Activities**
Contains an action plan template to build on the key issues above to create the exit strategy by identifying activities, assigning responsibilities, drawing up a timeline, selecting benchmarks and developing a monitoring plan.
- **Activity 3: Developing and Implementing a Flexible Timeline**

Tool 38: WGSS Partnership Project Closure Meeting Guidance Note

Sets out guidance for bringing together the WGSS service provider and partner program and operations staff to ensure that the partnership agreement is closed out responsibly, review the project outcomes, capture learning, and explore opportunities to continue to build the partnership.

Guidance Note on Ethical Closure of GBV Programmes (GBV Sub-Cluster Whole of Syria, Turkey/Jordan Hub, 2018) contains a comprehensive and concrete checklist with suggested action points by exit phase: preparedness phase, transitional phase and operational closure phase.



Bibliography⁵

GBV Sub-Cluster Whole of Syria, Turkey/Jordan Hub. (2018) Guidance Note on Ethical Closure of GBV Programmes. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/guidance-note-ethical-closure-gbv-programmes-gbv-sc-whole-syria>

HealthNetTPO & UNICEF South Sudan. (2016) Promoting Positive Environments for Women and Girls: Guidelines for Women and Girls Friendly Spaces in South Sudan. <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/guidelines-for-women-and-girls-friendly-spaces-in-south-sudan-1.pdf>

International Rescue Committee (IRC) & International Medical Corps (IMC). (2019) Women and Girls Safe Spaces: A Toolkit for Advancing Women's and Girls' Empowerment in Humanitarian Settings. Part 5 – Empowering Exits. <https://gbvaor.net/sites/default/files/2020-02/IRC-WGSS-Toolkit-Eng.pdf>

UNFPA and IRC. (2017) Safe Spaces for Women and Girls (SSWG) Standardization and Technical Guidance – How to set up a SSWG in practice, Rohingya Crisis, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/safe-spaces-women-and-girls-sswg-standardization-and-technical-guidance-how-set-sswg>

UNFPA. (2015) Women & Girls Safe Spaces: A guidance note based on lessons learned from the Syrian crisis. <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/women-girls-safe-spaces-guidance-note-based-lessons-learned-syrian-crisis>

The GBV AoR Help Desk

The GBV AoR Helpdesk is a technical research, analysis, and advice service for humanitarian practitioners working on GBV prevention and response in emergencies at the global, regional and country level. GBV AoR Helpdesk services are provided by a roster of GBViE experts, with oversight from Social Development Direct. Efforts are made to ensure that Helpdesk queries are matched to individuals and networks with considerable experience in the query topic. However, views or opinions expressed in GBV AoR Helpdesk products do not necessarily reflect those of all members of the GBV AoR, nor all of the experts of SDDirect's Helpdesk Roster.

Contact the Helpdesk

You can contact the GBViE Helpdesk by emailing us: enquiries@gbviehelpdesk.org.uk, and we will respond to you within 24 hours during weekdays.

The GBViE Helpdesk is available 09.30- 17.30 GMT, Monday to Friday.

⁵ Suggested citation of this note: Katie Robinette. (2020) Sustainability Strategies for Women and Girls Safe Spaces. London, UK: GBV AoR Helpdesk.