



Adolescent girls chatting at their weekly meeting at the WGSS center in Bor, South Sudan. ©Andreea Cameanu/CARE

EXAMINING WOMEN AND GIRLS' SAFE SPACES IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS: RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM NORTHWEST SYRIA AND SOUTH SUDAN

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Despite the widespread application of women and girls' safe spaces (WGSS) in humanitarian crises, there has been little rigorous evidence of the impact and effectiveness of this programming approach in participants' lives
- CARE conducted a cross-sectional study of women and girl participants in WGSS programs in Northwest Syria and South Sudan
- WGSS participation was associated with higher gender-based violence (GBV) service knowledge and utilization, and more gender equitable attitudes
- The study suggests that WGSS programs are a vital entry point through which women and girls can broaden their social networks and form significant relationships outside of their households
- Findings on psychosocial well-being revealed differences across age, country, and WGSS program participation, warranting further research

Background

Gender-based violence (GBV) in humanitarian contexts is a global issue of grave concern that disproportionately affects women and girls. Considering the detrimental impact of GBV on the health, well-being, and development of survivors, combatting and responding to GBV in all its forms is a priority for the international community.

Women and girls' safe spaces (WGSS) form one of the most widely implemented GBV prevention and response programming interventions in humanitarian contexts. Despite their widespread use and potential to increase the well-being, safety, and empowerment of women and girls, there is a lack of rigorous evidence regarding the role of these spaces in participants' lives. It is crucial to understand the impact and effectiveness of WGSS, including to determine how best to improve program quality and adapt programs to different contexts.

To address this evidence gap, CARE conducted a study to examine the effectiveness of its WGSS in Northwest Syria and South Sudan, two conflict-affected settings home to a large number of internally displaced persons (IDPs), and in which women and girls face a significant risk of experiencing GBV.

What are Women and Girls' Safe Spaces?

Women and Girls' Safe Spaces seek to provide: physical and emotional safety; access to multi-sectoral GBV response services; opportunity for women and girls to re-build social networks; psychosocial support; and targeted skill-building.

Methods

CARE implemented a cross-sectional survey among two groups of women and girls in Northwest Syria and South Sudan: (1) CARE's WGSS program participants and (2) women and girls from similar locations who were not participating in WGSS interventions. Researchers administered different survey instruments to women and girls to reflect relevant age, developmental, and other contextual factors. Key outcomes measured were psychosocial well-being, social support, knowledge and utilization of GBV services, and gender attitudes (Northwest Syria, only).

Results

Knowledge and Utilization of GBV Services

Knowledge and utilization of GBV services was significantly higher among WGSS participants in both Northwest Syria and South Sudan. A greater proportion of women and girls in the WGSS group consistently knew where to go for help if they felt unsafe and were more aware of available GBV response services than their non-WGSS counterparts (78.6% vs. 68.6% in Northwest Syria, and 59.2% vs. 55.7% in South Sudan). Women and girls in the WGSS group had also utilized more types of services in the past year than those not involved in WGSS programs and were more likely to report seeking formal services because they felt unsafe (45.3% vs. 31.4% in Northwest Syria, and 57.6% vs. 28.1% in South Sudan). The significant differences observed between WGSS participants and non-participants confirm the theory that these programs serve a critical role in connecting women and girls with needed support.

Social Support

WGSS participation was associated with a greater number and quality of female friendships outside the family, although these results differed according to age across the two country contexts. In Northwest Syria,

Summary of Results

	NW Syria				South Sudan			
	WGSS N=254		Non-WGSS N=255		WGSS N=247		Non-WGSS N=258	
	Women N= 134	Girls N= 120	Women N= 131	Girls N=124	Women N=170	Girls N=77	Women N=151	Girls N=107
Service Knowledge & Utilization								
Know where to seek services	78.6%		68.6%		59.2%		55.7%	
Have used services in past year	45.3%		31.4%		57.6%		28.1%	
Social Support								
Has friends outside family	82.7%		72.2%		82.2% (Girls only: 93.8%)		81.5% (Girls only: 78.4%)	
Sum Friends Composite Score <i>Max score of 15 (number and quality of friends)</i>	7.0		5.8		8.4 (Girls only: 8.6)		8.6 (Girls only: 7.5)	
Psychosocial Well-Being								
Level of distress <i>Max score of 24 (more distressed)</i>	11.3	6.1	10.2	6.1	7.2	10.2	9.9	9.1
Self-esteem <i>Max score of 40 (higher esteem)</i>	26.6		26.3		27.2		28.0	
Resilience <i>Max score of 40 for women & 36 for girls (greater resilience)</i>	25.3	32.5	25.0	30.7	14.1	22.4	16.6	23.4
Gender Equitable Attitudes*								
Household gender roles <i>Range -5 to +5</i>	0.8		0.3		Not assessed.			
Acceptability of girls' education <i>Range -8 to +8</i>	3.5		1.9					
Women's involvement in politics <i>Range -13 to +13</i>	4.3		2.2					

*A higher positive score indicates a more gender equitable attitude

involvement in WGSS programs was associated with a significantly higher number of female friendships outside of the family (82.7% vs. 72.2%). Similarly, women and girls in WGSS programs reported higher composite scores on the friendship measure that looked collectively at participants' relationships in terms of overall quality and frequency of contact (7.0 vs. 5.8). These findings suggest that WGSS programs are a vital entry point through which women and girls can broaden their social networks and form significant relationships outside of their households.

In South Sudan, girls who attended WGSS programs had a significantly greater number and quality of friendships (friendship composite scores 8.6 vs. 7.5), although this pattern did not hold true for women (8.4 vs. 8.6). This finding suggests that, in South Sudan, WGSS programming may serve a particularly powerful role for girls, strengthening their social networks. Why this is not the case for women warrants further investigation. It is also notable that the general composite measure for social support did not vary significantly between WGSS and non-WGSS participants in either setting, with a high level of reported social support overall.

Psychosocial Well-being

Findings for psychosocial well-being varied between contexts. In Northwest Syria, average distress scores were relatively low, regardless of WGSS participation. However, women's average (mean) distress scores were higher than those of girls in both study groups (11.3 vs. 6.1 and 10.2 vs. 6.1 among WGSS and non-WGSS respondents, respectively). Self-esteem scores were high and did not vary by study group (26.3 vs. 26.6 out of a maximum score of 40). Similarly, women's average resilience scores were relatively high across study

groups (25.3 vs. 25.0). In both groups, resilience scores were higher for girls than for women. However, girls in the WGSS group had higher scores than non-WGSS participants (32.5 vs. 30.7; mean difference 2.2, $p < 0.005$). This difference suggests that participation in WGSS may improve girls' self-efficacy and coping skills. The differential results among women and girls require further investigation to better understand the causes of distress and drivers of resilience, how they may vary according to age and other socio-cultural factors, and how programming can be adapted to take these issues into consideration.

In South Sudan, the research revealed that women WGSS participants reported significantly lower rates of distress compared to non-participants (7.2 vs. 9.9). For girls, however, this pattern was reversed, and rates of distress were higher among WGSS participants (10.2 vs. 9.1). As for resilience, it is notable that there was a significantly lower mean score for women in South Sudan who were involved in WGSS programming compared to their non-WGSS counterparts (14.1 vs. 16.6). Based on these findings, further research is needed to understand the causes of distress and drivers of resilience among women and girls in study areas in South Sudan, and to explore ways that programming can be adapted in response.

Gender Attitudes

In Northwest Syria, a highly significant association was observed between participation in WGSS programs and more gender equitable attitudes. Given the multiple ways in which gender equality has been associated with reduced rates of violence and discrimination, and other positive outcomes in the lives of women and girls, these results are particularly promising and suggest the need for continued programming in this area as part of WGSS interventions. This outcome was not assessed in South Sudan.

Conclusion

Findings from this research suggest that WGSS play a critical role in the lives of women and girls, with promising results shown across most study outcome areas.

- Participation in WGSS programming was highly associated with more gender equitable attitudes, pointing to the promise of WGSS programs for advancing gender equality.
- In both Northwest Syria and South Sudan, WGSS participants had more knowledge and higher utilization of services, suggesting that these interventions serve a critical role in connecting women and girls with needed support.
- In Northwest Syria, girl participants in WGSS programming reported higher resilience scores compared to non-WGSS participants, suggesting that WGSS programming may improve girls' self-efficacy and coping skills.
- Differential findings between contexts and across participant ages highlight the need to adapt programming to each individual context and the age-specific needs and capacities of women and girls.

Considering the significant differences observed between WGSS and non-WGSS participants in Northwest Syria and South Sudan, findings also suggest the need for further research and evaluation to build on this learning, and better understand the drivers of program impact and effectiveness across diverse humanitarian contexts.

Further details can be seen in [CARE's full report on this research](#).

Recommendations

For programmers:

- **Scale-up WGSS programs** while ensuring that they are designed with consideration of participants' age- and context-specific priorities, needs, capacities and resources. Programs should be informed by data disaggregated by sex, age, disability, and other relevant diversity characteristics, as well as this study and future research.

For policy makers:

- **Fund additional research on WGSS** to contribute further to an evidence base that helps ensure GBV programming responses are effective (see specific suggestions below).
- **Provide predictable, multi-year funding for WGSS programs** directed towards local women-led organizations to ensure programming is responsive to the needs and priorities of women and girls in specific contexts.

For future research:

- **Conduct follow-up research with women and girls participating in WGSS programs.** CARE's research has documented the positive impact of WGSS on gender equitable attitudes, psychosocial well-being, and social support. Additional research could generate further insights as to whether and how those changes are sustained over time and their longer-term impact. It would also provide evidence for whether and what smaller, sustained support or investment could bolster or catalyze that longer-term impact. Qualitative data collection should be used to further explore how and why WGSS are contributing to effective GBV prevention and response.
- **Replicate research on WGSS in different contexts.** This research is invaluable in understanding the needs, risks, vulnerabilities, and capacities of women and girls and what is effective in terms of preventing and responding to GBV through WGSS. Further insight into context is critical to make effective program adaptations and to maximize impact.
- **Further investigate causes of distress, drivers of resilience and the potential for WGSS and other similar programming approaches to improve women and girls' resilience and self-efficacy.** Findings show the significant potential of WGSS to strengthen girls' resilience and self-efficacy; there was less impact on women, however. What is more, the positive impact on girls was not consistent across the two study locations. Therefore, further research—including qualitative approaches—can help us to understand how to best adapt programs to account for contextual and population differences and how these programs could support women to strengthen their resilience and self-efficacy. Research would ideally be participatory, allowing the voices and perspectives of women and girls to drive both the questions and the solutions.
- **Explore the ways in which the roles and attitudes of male relatives and supporters can influence the effectiveness of WGSS programming.**

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