



Learning Brief about Gender Based Violence Response for Girls with Intellectual Disabilities

*What we heard from focus groups with
people with intellectual disabilities in
Kenya and Lebanon*





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Key words

Self-advocate

A self-advocate is a person with an intellectual disability who understands rights and advocates for inclusion.

Sexual and reproductive health rights

These are rights about health, sex and having babies. For example; the right to choose when to have children, or the right to choose your partner.

Communities

A community is a group of people living together in one place, like a neighborhood.

Barriers

A barrier stops someone from having the same opportunities or access to rights as other people.



Discrimination

This means treating someone badly because of who they are. For example, their race, gender, or disability. Discrimination is not allowed by law.

Gender-based violence

This is any violence against someone because of their gender. For example, if a man hurts a woman because she is a woman. This violence can be physical, sexual, emotional or mental.

About this Work

The IRC is the International Rescue Committee. The IRC helps people who need emergency aid, such as refugees.

Organisations like the IRC do not always understand how to include people with intellectual disabilities in their work. Especially work about Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights or Gender-Based Violence. The IRC realised they needed help.



The IRC worked with Inclusion International and two other organisations of people with disabilities to understand how to include women and girls with intellectual disabilities.

This document is about:

- **What the IRC found out**
- **Recommendations for how we can work in the future.**

How we worked



The IRC and Inclusion International planned 2 focus groups with Inclusion International members:

- 1 in Lebanon with 5 self-advocates from an organisation called the Lebanese Association for Self-Advocacy (LASA)
- 1 in Kenya with 6 self-advocates from an organisation called Kenya Association of the Intellectually Handicapped (KAIH)

During the focus groups, self-advocates and the IRC staff talked through short stories about gender based violence. The group then answered questions about the stories.

Stories

These are the stories the self-advocates talked about

Story 1

Samia has an intellectual disability. She got married when she was 15 and left school.

She didn't want to get married, but her parents told her she must. She is 17, has a baby, and is back home with her parents.

Samia's marriage ended because her husband hurt her.

Samia's father blames her for bringing shame on the family.



Story 2

Sara is a single woman who has a physical and intellectual disability. Sara has difficulty moving. She uses a wheelchair and does not have a job.

One day, a man comes to her and offers her help. She takes his food and money. After a week, he says that he will no longer help her unless she has sex with him. At that time, she has sex with him.



Questions



These are the questions the self-advocates answered in the focus groups:

- Have you heard of something like this story happening in your community?
- What kinds of violence or harm do adolescent girls with disabilities face in your community?
- If Sara or Samia told someone that she experienced this type of violence, how do you think people would respond?
- Is there anything else you want to share about this story?

What We Heard...

Experiences of gender-based violence

All the self-advocates from Lebanon and Kenya said they think all girls with intellectual disabilities experience some violence.

The groups said that there is a lot of shame in their communities about gender-based violence.



Self-advocates in Kenya said trusted people like religious leaders, doctors, and parents could harm women. One self-advocate said that she avoids boys in her community for safety. She said other girls should do the same.

"Her father was very cruel with her, he didn't let her express what she wants, and then her husband was very violent with her. When she returned to her parents' house, it was a cry for help. This is torture."

Lebanese self-advocate



Discrimination in the community

The groups talked about how badly communities treat girls with intellectual disabilities.

In Lebanon, some families hide girls because of abuse.

In Kenya families may not support girls who want to leave a marriage. The self-advocates said families feel “shame”.

“They [family] lock them inside the house, they don’t let them go out unless they are getting married. They beat them in the house and treat them in a bad way like a maid.”

Lebanese self-advocate

The self-advocates said police should punish abusers.

But in Kenya a self-advocate said police may not believe them or could be violent towards girls with intellectual disability, especially refugees.

“It is very difficult for someone living with a mental disability to go to the police...because they cannot believe you when you are accusing someone of violence.”

Kenyan self-advocate



Lack of information

The self-advocates said girls with intellectual disabilities do not know what violence is or how to report it.

They said there is not enough help available.



The self-advocates in Lebanon said Samia would have a hard time telling others about her problems.

They said Samia was not allowed to speak up in her society.

They said Samia's father would not listen to her or care about what she thought.

"[A] girl with intellectual disabilities does not differ between right and wrong. Sometimes she might think that something is not wrong. She is not able to identify violence, she does not know how to talk about it."

Lebanese self-advocate

Where girls with intellectual disabilities go for help

The Lebanese and Kenyan self-advocates said women in their families that they trust might help them.

They also said local organisations like women's organisations, and organisations of people with disabilities helped girls and women who experience violence.



The self-advocates said the help they needed was:

- help to report abuse
- moral support
- financial support
- education about their rights
- support to be empowered and advocate for themselves

"There are organisations who know women's rights so she can talk about herself. If she goes to someone else, they might beat her."

Lebanese self-advocate

Recommendations

The focus groups helped IRC understand the importance of helping women with intellectual disabilities to:

- learn about gender-based violence,
- know how to report it,
- feel confident and empowered.

Self-advocates gave recommendations for how to do this:

1. Good communication

There must be easy information and communication about violence and support services. Staff working with people with intellectual disabilities who have faced violence should:

- Be the same gender as the person
- Speak slowly, calmly and repeat information
- Listen carefully, show respect to the person
- Speak directly to the person
- Support the person to understand
- Make sure the person is comfortable
- Get support from someone the person trusts.



2. Plan inclusive gender-based violence work

Organisations like the IRC should:

- Include girls with intellectual disabilities in their programs about Gender Based Violence
- Understand the barriers girls with intellectual disabilities face in getting help
- Raise awareness about the rights of girls with intellectual disabilities



The IRC should partner with trusted local organisations of people with intellectual disabilities (OPDs) to:

- plan inclusive work on gender based violence
- help the community understand about the issues
- help local staff build skills on gender-based violence

Ideas from IRC Lebanon and Inclusion International

The IRC team in Lebanon and Inclusion International have also given their ideas:

The IRC team in Lebanon said:

- We should make sure girls with intellectual disabilities can take part in activities, like safe spaces for women and girls.
- Staff who run humanitarian programs should listen to girls with intellectual disabilities and their caregivers to understand how to make group activities accessible.
- Self-advocacy groups are important. They give girls and women support to understand rights and deal with violence.
- We need to create projects that are just about helping women and girls with intellectual disabilities.



Inclusion International said:

Our members are organisations of people with intellectual disabilities and their families all around the world, and our members say that:

- Communities do not understand about the barriers people with intellectual disabilities face.
- Women and girls with intellectual disabilities do not get good education or good health services about sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Women and girls with intellectual disabilities do not get help with violence.

To help make things better organisations like the IRC can:

- Train their staff on rights of people with intellectual disabilities and how to include self-advocates.
- Make easy-to-understand information.
- Raise awareness about violence against women and girls with intellectual disabilities.
- Include women and girls with intellectual disabilities when planning services and programs.



Extra information

Listen Include Respect are guidelines for organisations on how to be more inclusive and accessible to people with intellectual disabilities.

The IRC and Inclusion International used Listen Include Respect to plan this work.



Some other useful resources that Inclusion International members have worked are linked below:

- Inclusion Europe's - [Life After Violence report](#)
- Confe Mexico's - [Course on sexuality and rights](#)
- Mencap UK's - [Research on sexuality and relationships](#)
- Self-advocates Becoming Empowered USA's - pages on [sexuality and abuse](#)
- KAIH's - [page on access to justice with case studies](#)
- Liber Spain - [page on sexual and reproductive rights](#)
- Plena Inclusion Spain- [page on sexual and reproductive rights](#)
- Asdown Colombia's - Report on [Body Autonomy](#) and [Learning about sexuality and webpage](#).



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