Creating a Safe Space Online  
where Women and Girls can  
Access Information and Support

VIRTUAL SAFE SPACES

Background

Safe spaces for women and girls have been established as a key approach of reaching and providing them with key information, links to services, skills-building, peer connection, and support.

Yet, as access to physical safe spaces is often limited for adolescent girls and women especially during COVID-19. UNICEF has developed a platform to act as a virtual safe space (‘VSS’) for them to access information and support.

Initial pilot

The VSS pilot in Iraq and Lebanon in 2018 originally aimed to provide adolescent girls information on sexual and reproductive health (SRH). It became apparent that adolescent girls and women also lacked information on GBV information and required an interactive platform where they have a voice.

Fig.1: Wireframe of the initial platform
Current Iteration

Using the feedback from the pilot, UNICEF is now working on a new platform (VSS 2.0) rolled out in Ecuador and Iraq.

This version of the VSS used human-centered design (HCD) methodology to delve into the needs, desires of women and girls in order to design an accessible and secure platform.

The key outcome of the VSS is to facilitate access to information and services in a way that is safe, culturally appropriate, and accessible to adolescent girls and women, particularly those who face higher levels of marginalization, such as girls with disabilities and married girls.

UNICEF aims to:

- Create a digital space that enables women and adolescent girls to seek support, ask questions, know where to go to seek for help, and in time, replicate the sense of a safe social network on the platform.
- Reducing isolation, building safe spheres of support for adolescent girls.

To account for the low connectivity, limited levels of literacy, and safety aspect, there are a number of technical aspects that have been considered:

- For accessibility purposes, the content was designed as light as possible and offered in a variety of modes to make the information more accessible for learners of determination and learners with low reading and/or low ICT literacy.
- To ensure simple navigation in order to account for varying levels of literacy, WCA-Gand Material Design guidelines have been strictly followed.
- Highly interactive content designed with limited text based on requests by women and girls (e.g. TikTok-like videos, podcasts and quizzes).
- Highly customizable content editor to localize for each context.
- Platform is language agnostic and support any language supported by UTF-8.
- An exit button is present that allows for a quick exit from the site and clears the cache.
- Strict adherence to UNICEF’s data security and privacy standards.
Iraq and Ecuador included in the rollout of VSS 2.0. HCD experts leading on consultation with women and girls outlined current practices to determine pain points and developed user personas, work flows, and guidance for the tech developers.

Some specific insights were:

- Some women and girls used relatives’ social media account or relied on them to create accounts for them.
- Older adolescents and young adult women have more access to phones and a higher level of digital literacy than young adolescents and older adolescents.
- Women and girls of all ages lacked basic knowledge about SRH/GBV due to social norms and lack of education and don’t trust information found online.
- Displaced women and girls were the hardest to reach as many don’t access mobile phones or only have shared phones.

These insights have shaped the development of the high fidelity prototypes which are being tested with users in both countries. UNICEF is also working on developing localized content for each context so it meets the needs of the users in each country.

The Minimum Viable Product (MVP) is scheduled to be ready for testing in January 2022 and will go through extensive usability testing with women and girls.

**Next steps**

In order to expand the roll out of VSS to be rolled out around the world and demonstrate its capabilities, UNICEF plans to:

1) Create a **moderated user forum**, particularly when dealing with sensitive GBV content.
2) Introducing **gamification** into the content for greater engagement with the users.

In June 2021, the VSS platform as a solution to address GBV was identified as a **Generation Equality joint commitment** under the Gender Equality Forum between UNICEF, USAID, the Government of Finland and OSF.