

Laaha 

A virtual safe space  
for women and girls

unicef   
for every child



## Background

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

Yet, [access](#) to physical safe spaces is often limited for adolescent girls and women especially during COVID-19. UNICEF has developed an online platform, [Laaha, 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 wanted information on GBV information and required an interactive platform where they have a [voice](#).

# Current Iteration

From the pilot rollout in Iraq and Lebanon, UNICEF has worked on a new platform, [Laaha](#), the virtual safe space to be rolled out in [Ecuador](#) and [Iraq](#).

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

The key outcome of Laaha 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.

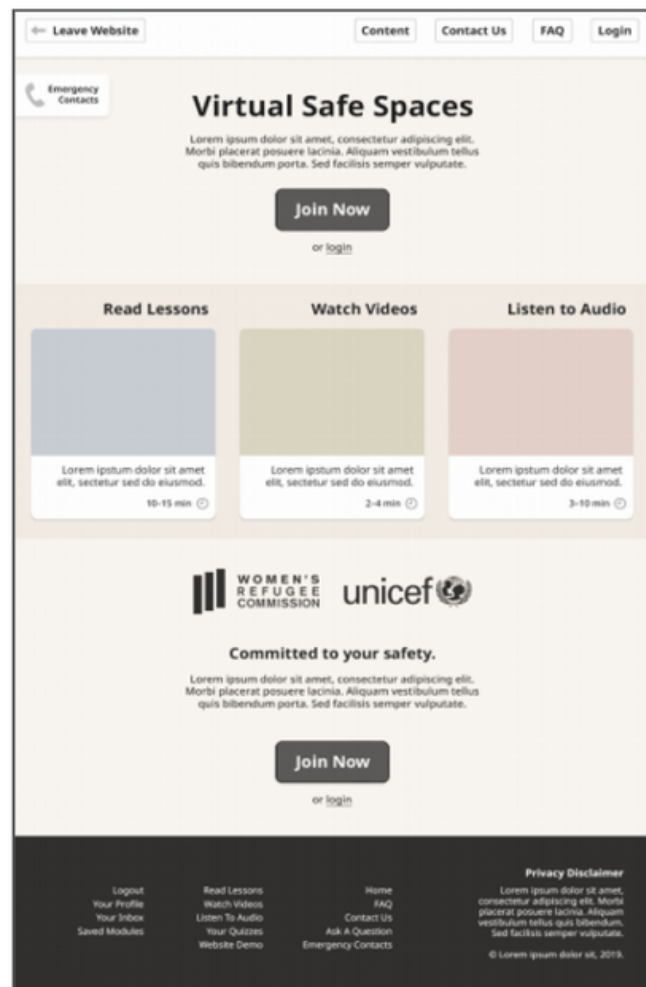


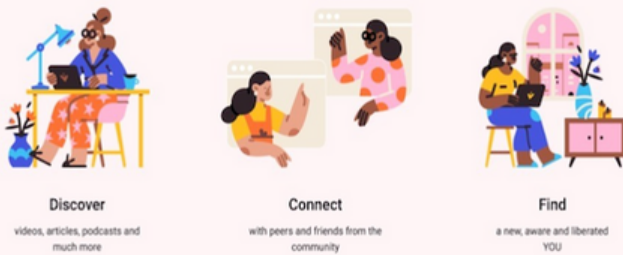
Fig 1. Wireframe of the initial platform in 2018

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.
- Reduce [isolation](#), building safe spheres of support for adolescent girls,.



## How Virtual Safe Spaces Can Help you



Discover

videos, articles, podcasts and much more

Connect

with peers and friends from the community

Find

a new, aware and liberated YOU

### Discover

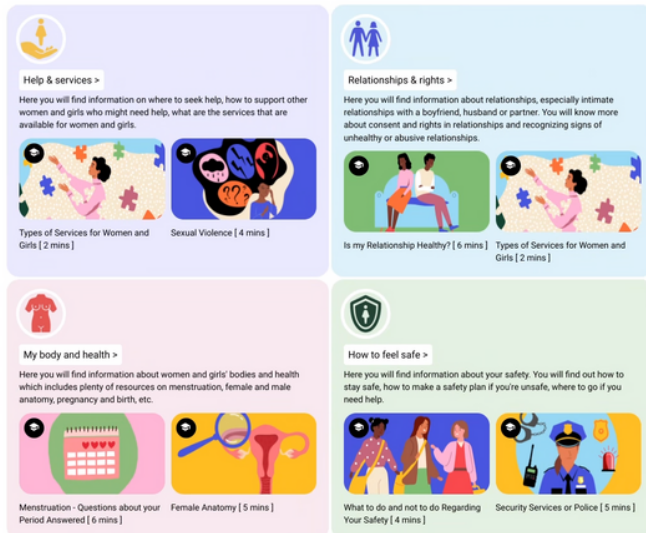


Fig.2: Samples from High-fidelity Prototype

To account for the **low connectivity**, limited levels of **literacy**, and **safety** considerations, there are a number of technical aspects that have been taken into account:

- For **accessibility** purposes, the content was designed to be 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**, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and 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, 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 were included in the rollout of Laaha. **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.**

Women and girls, through engagement with the HCD experts provided the following insights:

- 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 product, which has then been extensively tested with users in both countries.

## What Did Women and Girls Say About the Platform?

“*And the truth is that I felt safe visiting the site. It's not like visiting other sites. There can be so many different sources of information, it can be true, or it can be a lie, so I was sure to enter.*”

*\*Ella, 25 years old from Iraq*



“*I like the site because there are things you don't like to ask, it's embarrassing to ask my mother, and other people*”

*\*Maria, 14 years old from Ecuador*

“*I wanted to get help because my in-laws are very abusive and I want a house for me, my husband, and my son.*”

*\*Zara, 17 years old, refugee from Iraq*



## Next Steps

As we further rollout Laaha around the world and demonstrate its capabilities, UNICEF plans to:

- (1) Create a [moderated user forum](#), particularly when dealing with sensitive GBV content
- (2) Introduce [gamification](#) into the content for greater engagement with the users.

These two features are being developed based on human-centered design research and testing in Afghanistan and Venezuela.

In June 2021, Laaha 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 Open Society Foundation (OSF).



Authored by UNICEF HQ Division of Child Protection (Gender-Based Violence (GBV); colleagues across our country offices with gratitude to the Government of the United States of America Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs (BHA ) and other donors for their kind support. All images are from the platform and were developed in direct consultation with girls and women.

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\*Names changed to protect identity.