

As part of the Contextual Safeguarding Across Borders project, we partnered with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Germany. The IRC runs weekly group mentoring sessions for girls* and young women across accommodation centres for refugees, as well as in youth or neighbourhood centers and other locations. IRC trialled resources from the Contextual Safeguarding Network with one group of girls* (age 9-12) who live with their families in an accommodation centre. We wanted to better understand their experiences of safety and harm in the community. This case study shares key learning from this project and considerations about what Contextual Safeguarding means for refugee young people.

**girls* with an asterisk is used by the IRC to denote a diverse and LGBTQ+ inclusive definition of gender*

What did we do?



A group session with the girls*, co-facilitated by the mentor and one of the researchers, to ask the group about safety and risks in their peer and community contexts.



The mentor did a **safety mapping activity** with the group. They went on a walk in the local area and the girls* talked about where they felt safe and less safe and marked this out on a map. The mentor describes what they did in a podcast [available here](#).

We supported IRC project staff to do a **context assessment** that explored the safety features of the neighbourhood and the peer group contexts. We also added a couple of questions about groups and locations to their Monitoring and Evaluation questions.



The mentor and the project coordinator held a **support mapping meeting** to map out what support was already available for the group and discussed how the IRC might build safety for the group in the community. They also considered the areas that were flagged as places where the girls* felt less safe and whether the IRC had the capacity to address some of these concerns.

What did we learn?

Spaces where young people felt safe and unsafe were identified

Sources of safety discussed

- The group and the mentor
- Staff in the accommodation centre (social workers, security staff, caretaker, cleaners)
- Teachers/school social workers
- Specific activities organised for young people from the accommodation centres (swimming, football)

Sources of harm (and barriers to wellbeing) discussed

- Segregation of the accommodation centre (including access barriers for school friends who are unable to visit)
- Experiences of racism, sexism, adultism outside the compound (e.g. on transport, at the supermarket)
- Structural racism/witnessing violence through immigration raids
- Mixed residential occupancy of the compound (families and single adults)
- Surrounding environment (lack of residential houses nearby, more industrial use buildings; inadequate street lighting; lack of footfall)
- Lack of outreach from organisations running community activities locally

The activities opened up new discussions

The group session about safety and the safety mapping exercise were well received by the group. The girls* enjoyed taking ownership of the safety mapping activity. Afterwards the mentor noticed that they were more forthcoming with a range of issues across their lives.

“

we said that you get to pick out somewhere we should go and you show it to us. In that way they had a bit of control. The role reversal where the children show the adults something. They felt the effect of that. And what I also think was great was that they noticed it was about them and their experiences and they were being listened to.

(Practitioner Interview)

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The group as a source of safety

We also got a better understanding of the group dynamics and of the group as a source of safety for the girls. In the future, IRC wants to think more explicitly about recording the impact they want to have on the group (rather than just individuals in the group), as well as the benefit of the group to others in the accommodation centre.

Shining a light on structural harm

The group didn't report any inter-personal violence, but spoke at length about their experiences of racism coupled with sexism, adultism and feelings of marginalisation and isolation from others in the community. The girls* reported feeling worried and harassed in supermarkets, at school, on public transport and in public places. For example, being looked at funny on the tram for wearing a hijab.

“
When I sit in the tram I think some people look at me funny because I wear a hijab (...) When they look at me funny then I wonder and worry if I've done something wrong, am I sitting in the wrong place or something...

(Young person contribution in group session on safety)

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The activities highlighted the relationship between the contexts – the physical spaces in which the girls spend time – and broader forms of structural harm that can influence how the girls* experience safety and harm in these contexts. The girls* experiences flagged the intersectional nature of discrimination in these space. How can Contextual Safeguarding integrate structural forms of harm into the framework, to support us to understand the relationship between structural inequality and experiences of extra-familial abuse?

What were the challenges?



Translating concepts and adapting tools

- 'Concepts of 'harm' and 'safety' can be tricky to translate and require time, translation and relational ways of working to build a common understanding. At times the distance and timescales of this project made reaching a common understanding difficult
- The language barrier made this more difficult as the girls* came from different countries, spoke different languages, and were learning German.
- The group were younger (aged 9-12) than other young people the Contextual Safeguarding framework has been used with in the UK. There are further opportunities to adapt the tools to this age group.

Capacity

- The short time-scale (18 months) limited our ability to assess the impact of this work.
- Creating more contextual safety for young people in the community requires the development of partnerships – and this in turns requires increased capacity.


A challenging socio-political context

The project shed light on important limitations related to the wider socio-political context with many similarities to the UK:

- the absence of clarity in legislative frameworks about whose responsibility it is to address extra-familial harm
- a general lack of capacity for NGOs/community/youth work organisations and statutory services alike
- a lack of prioritisation of integration measures for refugee young people in the city
- an increasingly hostile policy environment for refugee young people and their families

What does Contextual Safeguarding mean for refugee young people?

The Contextual Safeguarding framework is based on four domains. This project highlighted key features of each domains that were particularly relevant for the group of girls* we worked with.



Domain 1: Target

Seeks to prevent, identify, assess and intervene with the social conditions of abuse




Domain 2: Legislative framework

Incorporate extra-familial contexts into child protection frameworks



Domain 3: Partnerships

Develop partnerships with sectors/individuals responsible for extra-familial contexts



Domain 4: Outcomes measurement

Monitor outcomes of success in relation to contextual, as well as individual, change

- **Target (domain 1):** the Contextual Safeguarding framework with its focus on 'social conditions of harm' allows us to consider how contexts can feature hostility and inequality from the state and public organisations as well as inter-personal violence and abuse (and how these are connected). For example, the girls* and their families lived in segregated housing whilst they awaited immigration decisions. Many had witnessed systemic violence towards refugees from the police and deportation raids at the shelter, as well as in the community. Safe 'contexts' for refugee young people can also therefore be temporary and precarious. Many live in situations of instability and insecurity because they are on the move, and/or living in temporary spaces, and often have to wait a long time on outcomes of decisions about their rights to stay in a country. This was made clear to us in the group session co-facilitated with a researcher from our team when a van pulled up outside the activity room and the girls* became worried because they thought one of the families was being removed.
- **Legislative framework (domain 2):** there are competing legislative frameworks between the child welfare and immigration systems meaning that children's rights/best interests are not always prioritised.
- **Partnerships (domain 3):** partnerships between NGOs/VCS organisations and statutory services are needed (with alignment in objectives) in order to build safety (and capacity) in the spaces where young people are at risk of harm.
- **Outcomes measurement (domain 4):** there are opportunities to measure the impact of support on spaces and groups which is particularly important for refugee young people where hostile contexts contribute largely to harm and where friendships/peers are such a strong source of safety and support.

LEARN MORE



See our [project page](#) for more information and resources and find out more about Contextual Safeguarding on the Contextual Safeguarding [Network](#).

